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## IS SALVATION A PROCESS?

### I

“ALREADY he is a saved man.” Such is the true believer in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, according to *Hastings’ Bible Dictionary*,<sup>1</sup> a work which does not profess to specialize in fidelity to Evangelical doctrine. On the other hand, according to a recent and subsequently incontroverted article in the Anglican Evangelical Quarterly *The Churchman*,<sup>2</sup> “no one may boldly declare that he is a saved man, while life lasts.” Which of these two directly opposed positions are we to choose and adopt? “To the law and to the testimony!” What saith the Scripture?

“What the New Testament teaches,” says Salmon, “is that you cannot be saved hereafter unless you have been saved here. ‘Now is the accepted time: now is the day of salvation’—“now”, not in the hour of death or after it. It is “the truth,” he goes on, “that salvation is not some unknown blessing to be enjoyed in the future, but a thing to be grasped in the present,” and “justifying faith is that act of the mind by which the sinner lays hold of the salvation which Christ has purchased”, as the Reformers taught.<sup>3</sup> The writer in the quarterly, contrariwise, designates salvation as not an act but a protracted “process”—five times over in his four and a half pages: “While life lasts salvation is progressing”. It is to be “achieved” by “our efforts”. It is a matter of “attainment”, of “goal”-reaching (2). It is to be gained “gradually” (2), as an outcome of “expansion” and “development” (2).

The New Testament familiarizes us with salvation as a transaction which has already decisively as well as promptly eventuated, in individual cases, and in which unequivocally God has been the primary agent. Take the word *save*, itself, and the tense in which it normally appears; the force of the aorist in the Greek cannot be gainsaid. “God who saved us,”

<sup>1</sup> Article “Salvation”, Vol. IV, 367a.

<sup>2</sup> 1937, p. 75.

<sup>3</sup> “Reign of Law”, etc., pp. 289, 295; “Sermons” (1861), p. 238.

2 Tim. i. 9; Titus iii. 5; "by hope we were saved," Rom. viii. 24, R.V.; "this day salvation came to pass for this house," Luke xix. 9. We have the perfect tense, also, in the two places, Luke vii. 50, "thy faith hath saved thee," and Ephes. ii. 8, "by grace ye have been saved". In the subjunctive mood it is the aorist that *invariably* obtains, both in the active voice (John xii. 47; Rom. xi. 14; 1 Cor. ix. 22) and in the passive (Luke viii. 12; John iii. 17; v. 34; Acts xvi. 30; 1 Cor. v. 5; x. 33; 1 Thess. ii. 16)—though with *other verbs* the present subjunctive can be met with (as in 1 Cor. xiv. 3; 2 Thess. iii. 1; 1 Pet. iv. 11). The aorist imperative passive occurs in Acts ii. 40 ("Be saved ye"). As to the infinitive mood, out of its thirteen occurring cases twelve are in the aorist (Matt. xvi. 25; Luke xix. 10; 1 Cor. i. 21; 1 Tim. i. 15; James i. 21; ii. 14, in the active form, and, in the passive, Matt. xix. 25; Acts iv. 12; xv. 1, 11; 2 Thess. ii. 10; 1 Tim. ii. 4). We shall deal with the few exceptions presented by this particular verb presently.

A like absence of any suggestion of the indecisive or protracted is clearly deducible from the aorist tense of other N.T. verbs evangelically tantamount thereto. We may instance "to be reconciled" (Rom. v. 10, 11; 2 Cor. v. 18, 20); "to be made nigh" (Ephes. ii. 13); "made free" (Rom. vi. 18, 22; viii. 2; Gal. v. 1); "be forgiven" or "receive forgiveness" (Acts x. 43; xxvi. 18; Eph. iv. 32; perf. 1 John ii. 12); "be cleansed" (Eph. v. 26, with Titus ii. 14; Heb. i. 3; 1 John i. 9, in the active); to become sons of God and of light (John i. 12; xii. 36; Gal. iv. 5). We pass over "to be justified" for the moment. Note ought to be taken, furthermore, of the peremptory aorist form of such commands as "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ" and "Take the helmet of salvation".

How can any protractedness be read into our Lord's "to-day" spoken to Zaccheus as well as to the penitent thief, and carried by re-echo also from the Psalms to the Epistles and, the Hebrews; or into the "now is the day of salvation", already quoted?

Look at two Divinely certificated types of the Old Testament—the Flood and the Desert Serpents. Is there any hint of a long-drawn process in the command "Come thou into the ark", or in the assurance, "Every bitten one that looketh on the brazen serpent shall live"? And equally so in regard to two of the Lord's Parables with the statement that the publican

“went down to his house justified”, and the Father’s impetuous order (as given in the Revised Greek), “Quick! bring forth a robe—the best” for the returned prodigal.<sup>1</sup>

Christ’s gracious miracles of physical healing, too, were portrayals of His soul-healing and none of them were of gradual performance. Two of them are indeed very frequently held to have been exceptions. The ten lepers are sometimes visualized as feeling and finding themselves gradually and progressively, parting with their disease as they trudged along the road to reach the priests; whereas the sense of the text is that “in the act of moving off they were cleansed”.<sup>2</sup> The cure of the blind Bethsaida man (Mark viii) comprised two instantaneous items—first, the instant bestowal of the bare visual faculty; then, the equally instant bestowal of the faculty of perspective. There is not a single case of Christ’s having performed a miracle gradually. The *Churchman* article maintains that, salvation being a concern of spiritual life, “as by natural birth we are introduced into the natural kingdom”, so there must be the protracted child-stage in the spiritual life. But what was there of an infantile or temporarily unconscious order in the results of the Saviour’s three type-fraught raisings from the dead? They “walked”, they “talked”, they “sat at table”,—Mark v. 42; Luke vii. 15 (*λαλῆν*); John xii. 2. Again, the numerous “straightways” in the miracle narratives find their parallel later in the “straightways” of the accounts of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus and of the Philippian jailor.

The moment a sinner believes  
And trusts in his crucified Lord,  
That moment he pardon receives  
And justification by blood.

## II

The Gospel statement which has usually come first to the mind of those that take for granted a present decisive salvation holds good of course also—“He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life”, John iii. 36. The declaration is repeated in John v. 24; vi. 47; and 1 John v. 13, under the first of which Dr. J. H. Bernard, Tractarian though he was,

<sup>1</sup> See the “quickly” of the Great Supper also, Luke xiv. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Luke xvii. 14, *ἐν τῷ ἀπάγειν*. “Get away”, “withdraw”, simply is the force of that verb, without conscious advertence to any extended journey; see its first N.T. occurrence, Matt. iv. 10.

writes: "John is quite clear that the believer *has* 'passed from death into life', into the eternal life which begins here". "The obedient believer *has*<sup>1</sup> eternal life, as a present possession. . . . The believer 'comes not to judgment'; that has already been determined." He adds illuminatingly: "Some Latin versions try to escape the force of the perfect tense ('has passed') by the renderings *transit*, *transiet* ('is passing', 'shall pass')." "

To return again to the word *save*. It is contended, and quite correctly, that the verb (in its spiritual sense, of course) is to be met with, occasionally, in its *future* form. But this, in one set of cases, comes under the heading of the grammatical usage, cited in, say, Winer's N.T. Greek Grammar,<sup>2</sup> according to which there is a class of future tense which points, not to some given coming time severed by an interval from the present, but to all future time henceforward from the present moment as the period in which *a rule or law*, here and now stated, shall absolutely operate. And the operation may be immediate in each separate case. This covers John x. 9; Acts xv. 11; Rom. v. 9, 10; x. 9; 1 Cor. iii. 15. Then secondly, the evil aftermath general of sins' entrance into the world remains an abiding factor after a believer's personal guilt has been savingly remitted, and he needs to be Divinely kept safe through, and finally brought safely out of, that. It is because he continues exposed to that, spiritually or materially, that the saved one still needs to pray, Deliver us from evil. There persists a groaning within (Rom. viii. 23). There is tribulation—distress—persecution—famine—nakedness—peril—sword (ver. 35). But there is a consummation awaiting, when there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, nor pain (Rev. xxi. 4). This is the "salvation" (the noun form of "save"), in its consummate and perfected state, which is so termed in Rom. xiii. 11; 1 Thess. v. 8; Heb. ix. 28; 1 Pet. i. 5; ii. 2 (R.V.). But for the soul salvation has already been bestowed; the believer has been reconciled with God, and can call himself a "saved" man, as Scripture does. And within this category we may also properly place the futures of Matt. x. 22b (=xxiv. 13) and 2 Tim. iv. 18. "Save" in both Greek and English can mean "make safe", and also (though less often) "keep safe" what has already been safe (or made safe).

<sup>1</sup> The italics are his.

<sup>2</sup> §40, Sixth Edition.

The opponents, however, of belief in decisive soul-salvation consciously and joyously realizable in this life are assured that they can launch their attack at closer range still. The verb *save* occurs sometimes in *present* Greek tense: so the individual believer's soul-salvation must be a process developing gradually and progressing while life lasts towards goal. Let us then inspect the references. In the indicative mood there are three instances, one active and two passive (1 Pet. iii. 21; 1 Cor. xv. 2; 1 Pet. iv. 18); in the imperative, one (Jude 23); in the infinitive, two (Heb. v. 7; vii. 25); in the participial, four passives (Luke xiii. 23; Acts ii. 47; 1 Cor. i. 18; 2 Cor. ii. 15); in the subjunctive there are none (over against the ten cases in the aorist, already adverted to). And the crucial feature emerges that (passing over Heb. v. 7 where the personal object is the Son of God) there is no singular personal object of any of the actives, no singular personal subject for any of the passives.<sup>1</sup> The personal subjects or objects in each instance represent unnumbered multitudes which range through all Christian ages on into eternity, and whose component members are unidentifiable. How can it be argued, on the mere ground of a present tense, that the action of the verb "save" must necessarily be carried on over the whole lifetime of each individual member of each of these multitudes ?

Take the participial forms—four plural passives, the *hoi sozomenoi* in Greek. The one in the Acts of the Apostles, in its R.V. form, "those that were being saved", has almost become a consecrated slogan with gradual salvation advocates. What could be plainer, for those who would guide themselves by the Bible? Each and every sincere Christian is, while life lasts, being saved.

When he was in his heyday, a yarn used to be spun about Bishop Westcott, as to how a Salvation Army officer, who once button-holed him on a railway platform and inquired solicitously if he was saved, was left speechless with the gentle rejoinder, Do you mean *sotheis* or *sesosmenos*, or *sozomenos*? No explanatory addendum used to be given that the worthy evangelist did not happen to be well-informed enough to remind the learned bishop that, while the Greek New Testament contains four references to a serial, continuative multitude called *hoi sozomenoi*, it knows nothing of a single continuous,

<sup>1</sup> "The righteous" of 1 Pet. iv. 18, is plainly generic.

process-undergoing, *sozomenos*.<sup>1</sup> Not that there could not have been a *sozomenos*, but, we hold, one could only have been that for a passing instant.<sup>2</sup>

### III

Will our "progressive" friends frankly face a question or two? Are we to conclude—rather, are we to assume it as a matter of course—that the *hoi peritemnomenoi*, "those that are being circumcised" (Gal. vi. 13; see also v. 3) underwent a lifelong gradual process? Vice-Principal Huxtable, of Wells Theological College, who was not particularly evangelical, in his able commentary on "Galatians" (p. 308), understands them to be "those who were *one after another* undergoing the rite". Is not that the commonsense significance of the plural (or of the generic singular) participle in these places, whether the expounder would have as readily recognized it in Acts ii. 47 or not? Similarly, were the *hoi baptizomenoi*, "those that are being baptized", 1 Cor. xv. 29, interminably subjecting themselves to immersion or affusion while life lasted? Or is it not a continuous sequence of fresh volunteers that we are to see in them?<sup>3</sup> In Rev. vii. 14 we have the plural participle of a deponent middle verb, *hoi erchomenoi*, "those that come out" (of tribulation); are these gradually coming out, emerging head and shoulders first like the man in the story of the priests praying souls out of Purgatory? In the Pulpit Commentary it is said: "Not 'they which came', as if all were past; nor 'which will come', as if all were future; but 'they which are coming'; there is *a continuous pouring in of them* from the world . . . and this will go on *till all be gathered home*." Accordingly, "those that were (and are) being saved"<sup>4</sup> stand for the constant and continuous and ever-replenished stream and series of souls that, one by one, one after another, have ever awakened and still awaken to their need of a Saviour, and have committed and still commit themselves to His pardoning love and to the pursuit of His holy will. We have no quarrel at all with the r.v. rendering.

Some will have it that salvation must not be identified

<sup>1</sup> At the recent Calvinist Congress at Edinburgh, July, 1938 (see report), this legend was retailed as a helpful summarizing of the true doctrine on the subject!

<sup>2</sup> The singular passive participle in Heb. v. 4 presents a case in point.

<sup>3</sup> Are the satraps of 1 Pet. ii. 14, or the angels of Heb. i. 14, always being handed their commissions (*pempomenoi*, *apostellomena*) and never arriving at their destination or objective?

<sup>4</sup> And equally the subjects of the passive *save*, and the objects of the active, in 1 Cor. xv. 2; Heb. vii. 25; 1 Pet. iii. 21; iv. 18; Jude 23.

with *justification*, that is to say, what they deem to be the latter's initial and undeveloped stage, as resting upon faith only, but upon that mature "justification" propounded by Cardinal Contarini at the Reformation, and Bishop Bull and Wesley later, which includes meritorious works as well. But Scripture, if it is by it we are to be led, only reveals to us the former, and in such terms that to distinguish salvation from it is impracticable. We are saved by grace (Eph. ii. '8), and justified by grace (Rom. iii. 24; Titus iii. 7). We are saved through faith (according to at least nine passages), and justified through faith (according to just as many). "Save" and "justify" are synonyms in James ii. 14, 24; Titus iii. 5, 7; Rom. v. 9. If "save" occurs, as we have seen, now and then in a present tense, though pasts vastly predominate, so is it also with "justify" (Acts xiii. 39; Rom. iii. 24, 28; iv. 5; Gal. iii. 8), on grounds that are equally explainable.

#### IV

This tenet of a gradually maturing salvation has been considerably, though quite undesignedly, furthered within recent times by an injudicious vogue within orthodox Evangelical circles of stressing "present salvation" over against the completed salvation of the life to come. It was contended that, with great resultant loss spiritually, people were too accustomed to restrict their outlook and anticipations to the perfect and crowning satisfactions and reliefs of the latter. So, with the onesidedness which usually marks such reactive situations, pulpits were kept ringing forth the saved soul's deliverances and triumphs in the present, often with sidelong expressions of scorn for what heaven has in store. And it was not a hard thing for ill-taught hearers of this watchword "present salvation" to become eventually confused between a salvation already abidingly present as an accomplished fact within us, and a salvation being gradually attained and achieved by us in the present. Scripture, as has been remarked, enforces no distinction between "make safe" and "keep safe", yet in regard to sustaining grace here below for the believing soul, there are therein other words used and usable, such as "keep" (*terein*, *phulassein*, *phrourein*), "confirm" (*bebaioun*), "establish" (*sterizein*), with their cognates, so that "save" and "salvation" could be left to themselves.



Nowadays there is a great fancy for *alliteration* in statements of religious doctrine. And when strict correctness clashes with the alliterative feature, it is the former that too commonly has to give way. One bethinks specially of a familiar and hackneyed example germane to our subject. The Christian has been saved from sin's *penalty*, is being saved from sin's *power*, and will be saved from sin's *presence*. For one's self, viewing those first two jointly, the suggestion of defect, needing a supplementing, in God's past radical dealing with a soul is hard of acceptance. It seems like an effort to segregate living and breathing. The second, the "present salvation" so-called, is surely an inevitable outcome, or rather phase, of the other. And, again, is not the chastening, which is still to be expected to follow the sin of a reconciled, justified believer, in some sense a penalty?

Further, not all religious poems, however personally and temporally true, are fitted to serve as congregational hymns. There are hymns not a few which set the believing singer in a hitherto and so far unsaved position in God's presence. This is surely a factor which acts as the reverse of a safeguard against the notion of a gradual salvation. It belies Gospel finality, assurance, establishment. One may instance "Pass me not, O gentle Saviour"; "Weary of earth"; "Tell me the old, old story"; "Does the Gospel word proclaim"; "Thou didst leave Thy throne"; "O my Saviour, hear me"; "Someone will enter the pearly gate"; "I hear Thy welcome voice"; even "Just as I am".<sup>1</sup> Not that we require to be meticulous to the point of sheer bondage. The other school, however, know how to limit their liberality in this connection. Canon Kennedy, of Shrewsbury, the compiler of "Hymnologia Christiana", would not admit into his collection Watts' "When I can read my title clear", as being "gravely wrong in doctrine".

But what impels religious people so commonly to back up the doctrine? Well, take the worldly-minded, nominal Christians. On which side, naturally, are they likely to come down? The idea of two distinct classes in God's sight down here, however acknowledged to be unspecifiable visibly as regards membership, is odious to them. They want this world to be a No-Man's-Land. Let demarcation obtain hereafter, if you choose,

<sup>1</sup> There can, we gladly remember, be a "coming" in the sense of the believer's constant priestly "drawing nigh" of the Epistle to the Hebrews.

in heaven and hell, but never here. To have some religion is a very proper thing, but to expect folk to "flee for refuge to lay hold on the hope set before us"<sup>1</sup> is an idea quite too drastic and peremptory. A fully and consciously realizable salvation, in definite reconciliation with God through Christ, in this life, they "have no use for".

The sacerdotal element must give first thoughts to the ecclesiastical institution and the functionary. He must increase, and God must decrease. He can instantly regenerate at the font; he can instantly absolve in the confessional; he can instantly summon Deity down from heaven upon the altar! But God must not be permitted any immediacy in granting reconciliation to the soul that trusts in Christ's atoning blood! What would become of the church-institution, as they conceive it, if prodigals and penitent thieves could, without going through some "process", here and now, get right with God? "The great goddess Diana would be deposed from her magnificence".<sup>2</sup> This, by the way, is not to say that we forget the non-catastrophic "Timothy" cases.

To us it means the Gospel, and nothing short of it. If "Gospel" means good news, how can that gladsome appellation be attached to some protracted and gradual and lifelong "process"? If I receive my home call to-night, and know myself to be on my dying bed, how am I to satisfy myself as to whether in my case this alleged process had gone forward just far enough for my immortal soul's security? I must go out under a cloud of doubt and darkness to meet my Maker! Is it for this that the Apostle reiterates his appeal to me to "rejoice in the Lord"?<sup>3</sup> Was it for his admittance into such a tenterhook plight before God as this that the Ethiopian went on his way rejoicing?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Heb. vi. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Acts xix. 27, R.V.

<sup>3</sup> Phil. iii. 1; iv. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Acts viii. 39.